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The Ebb and Flow of Sociological Interest in Values

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Contemporary sociology and social psychology have largely ignored the study of values. In this essay, I explore the reasons for that condition, the exceptions to the rule, and the areas that would most benefit from the consideration of values.

KEY WORDS: culture; measurement; Robin M. Williams Jr.; social psychology; values.

INTRODUCTION

A concern with values is pervasive in contemporary public discourse, framing some of our most contentious social and political issues: protecting the environment versus protecting business interests, national security versus civil liberties, and various issues falling under the ''family values'' umbrella (e.g., abortion, gay marriage, stem cell research, divorce laws). It seems values are implicated in most of the things we consider important and for which we are willing to fight and sacrifice. It is easy to make the case for the importance of values. They are core elements of cultures and subcultures, they give meaning and purpose to our lives, are important to our self-conceptions, and can be powerful sources of motivation (e.g., suicide bombers).

Values in Social Psychology

You would think that ''values'' would be a major focus of sociological inquiry, but that is not the case, at least not in contemporary sociology and social psychology. Although there is some important work being done

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on values, especially within social psychology (much of it inspired by Robin M. Williams Jr. elaborated by Milton Rokeach, and continued by Shalom Schwartz), values are not nearly as prominent in sociological and social psychological research and theory as such related concepts as "norms," "roles," and "attitudes." Part of the reason is conceptual. Conceptualizations of values have tended to be more ambiguous, more abstract, and more difficult to measure than attitudes, norms, and roles. Values have been used to refer to goals, desires, needs, guiding principles, morality, the worth or utility of things (as in "exchange value"), general preferences, and criteria of evaluation.

One of Williams' important contributions to the study of values was to provide a clear and concise definition. He defined values as "those conceptions of desirable states of affairs that are used as criteria of evaluation" (Williams, 1967:23). Values, in this definition, pertain to the realm of what "ought" to be, to desired states of being that constitute standards or criteria for making decisions and for justifying behavior. This conceptualization of values was particularly important in shaping social psychological research and theory on values.

Milton Rokeach, the social psychologist most closely associated with the study of values, acknowledged his debt to Williams (Rokeach, 1973), especially with regard to the definition of values (as criteria or standards of evaluation), conception of values organization (forming clusters and hierarchies), and the interrelationship between values, norms, and attitudes. Both Williams and Rokeach considered values as more abstract, less bound to specific situations, and more important than attitudes and norms. Rokeach elaborated on Williams' basic conceptualization by distinguishing between "instrumental" (means) and "terminal" (ends) values (a distinction that turned out to be problematic), developed ranking scales consisting of 18 instrumental and 18 terminal values (also problematic because of the ranking requirement), and conducted extensive research to assess and to change people's values (see, especially, Ball-Rokeach *et al.*, 1984; Rokeach, 1973).

Shalom Schwartz, currently the most influential social psychology of values scholar (Rokeach died in 1988), built on Rokeach's and Williams' work. Schwartz (Schwartz and Bilsky, 1987) developed a circumplex model of value orientations (based on two general value polarities that are used to organize 10 specific values), constructed rating scales for measuring these 10 values, and conducted extensive comparative research on the values of various groups. Schwartz's conceptualization and measures of values are currently the most popular within social psychology. In spite of the substantial contributions of Williams, Rokeach, Schwartz, and others, research on values constitutes a very small part of social psychology. Still,

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values have a great deal of potential for expanding their scope and relevance for social psychology—a point to which I will return.

Values in Sociology

Within sociology proper, especially at the macro level of sociological inquiry, interest in the study of values has also been mixed. Values are most likely to be considered when a society's or a group's culture (or some element of culture, such as religion) is the main focus of attention. Weber's thesis in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is exemplary in this regard; he examined how a set of values and religious beliefs contributed to the development of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism. Talcott Parsons's grand theorizing built on Weber's work and gave values a prominent place in his ambitious (but cumbersome, abstract, and not very amenable to research) functionalist theory of society. More recent, and more historically grounded, value examinations on a grand scale are Bellah *et al.*'s (1985) *Habits of the Heart*, and Hewitt's (1989) *Dilemmas of the American Self*. Both books examine values and value conflicts in U.S. society as they play out in the continuing tension between individualism and community (and commitment).

Williams' (1951, 1967, 1968) work falls within this tradition of examining values on a large canvas, U.S. society. He identified and discussed 15 value orientations characteristic of U.S. culture: achievement and success; activity and work; moral orientation; humanitarian mores; efficiency and practicality; progress; material comfort; equality; freedom; external conformity; science and secular rationality; nationalism and patriotism; democracy; individual personality; and racism and group superiority. While we may quibble about the inclusion of some of these categories (e.g., is racism a value?) and may wish to add a few other values (e.g., family bonds) to the list, it provided an insightful view of U.S. culture. It also influenced the development of subsequent value schemas, especially those of Rokeach and Schwartz. But macro analyses of a society's values are increasingly rare, as the trend toward more delimited and narrow research foci continues within sociology.

A more delimited focus on values can be found in the sociological literature on socialization, especially child socialization. Socialization is typically defined as the process by which a child or novice is integrated into a group's culture by learning and internalizing the group's values, norms, roles, beliefs, and ways of life. Socialization, of course, is a topic that cuts across several disciplines (sociology, anthropology, developmental psychology) and covers a wide range of processes and outcomes, such

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as moral development, pro-social behavior, self-concept development, and development of specific identities (gender, racial, ethnic) and specific values (freedom, equality, independence). One of the most influential programs of sociological research into value socialization is that of Melvin Kohn and his colleagues. Kohn (1969) argued that (some) values are functional adaptations of individuals to structural conditions they experience, especially at work. In a series of studies, Kohn and Schooler (1983) found that work that is routine, closely supervised, and relatively uncomplicated gives rise to values of conformity, whereas work that is complex and encourages self-direction gives rise to the value workers place on independence and autonomy. These occupation-generated values of autonomy and conformity were found to hold for the workers themselves and for the values they emphasized in socializing their children. Kohn's research on values reflects sociologists' tendency to look primarily for social structural explanations of cultural (values) and psychological variables. With regard to values research, it is a minority view, since values are more commonly perceived as core elements of culture.

The cultural perspective on values and value socialization is most evident in anthropology. In Kluckholn and Strodtbeck's (1961) influential formulation, values are core elements of culture, integral to a culture's worldview, and giving meaning and purpose in people's lives. Here, socialization is viewed as essentially enculturation, whereby children learn and internalize the values and folkways of their parents, perpetuating the culture from generation to generation. Although there is a strong tendency for anthropologists to favor cultural explanations and sociologists to favor social structural explanations, this is not an absolute disciplinary distinction, since there are representatives of the opposite orientation in each discipline. In any case, these two perspectives on values are not incompatible, most of the time.

Sometimes, however, the cultural and the structural perspectives on values come in direct conflict. This was the case in the heated debates over the "Moynihan Report" (Moynihan, 1965; Rainwater and Yancey, 1967) and the "culture of poverty" in the 1970s. The issue was whether the cycle or perpetuation of poverty (the "Moynihan Report" focused on African-American families and communities) was caused primarily by structural conditions (e.g., continuing economic and educational disadvantages) or cultural factors (i.e., the emergence of a "culture of poverty" that was self-perpetuating). This was more than just an academic disagreement, since it had political implications: the structural position advocated changing the structural conditions that were causing poverty, thereby eliminating poverty and its subcultural adaptations; the cultural position advocated changing the "culture of poverty" itself (e.g., via education programs,

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etc.), which was seen as self-perpetuating and dysfunctional for success in mainstream U.S. society. Eventually, the idea of a "culture of poverty" lost favor in academic and political arenas and the debate faded out, without much change in poverty in the United States. The "culture of poverty" idea was a rather unusual expression of the cultural perspective on values. Its demise has not diminished the dominance of the cultural perspective on values. Perhaps this is another reason for the relative neglect of values in sociological inquiry.

Values in Future Research

Interest in studying values has been mostly marginal to mainstream sociology, but there has been an ebb and flow to the attention values have received. In general, interest tends to ebb during times of social stability and flow during turbulent times, when dominant values in society are challenged. For example, interest seemed to increase in the 1960s and 1970s (marked by cultural clashes associated with the hippies and the Vietnam War), receded in the 1980s (a more conservative time in the United States), and has been increasing again since the 1990s (marked by dramatic technological and global changes). Even though sociological inquiry tends to lag behind social trends and historical events, the time seems ripe for renewed interest in studying values.

I have a few thoughts on how values can become more central to sociological and social psychological concerns. One area of sociological inquiry that would benefit from a greater interest in values is self-theory. Self-theory in sociology has developed largely within the context of symbolic interaction theory, from the early formulations of G. H. Mead and Cooley to more recent expressions in the works of Stryker (1980), Rosenberg (1979), and Turner (1976). It is within "structural symbolic interactionism" as formulated by Stryker (1980) that self-theory, or "identity theory" as Stryker calls his version, has received the fullest development and has had the greatest influence. Stryker's identity theory is based on roles and role relationships. To be sure, roles are important to the social order, and role identities are important sources of self-definition. Roles also provide a vital link between individuals and social structures. Roles and role identities are understandably important in sociological theories. But values and value-based identities are also important links between individuals and larger social and cultural systems, and an important basis for self-definitions. Yet they tend to be absent from our self-theorizing. As I have argued elsewhere (Gecas, 2000), the incorporation of value-based identities would enrich and expand self-theory. The value

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domain as a source of identities and self-conceptions places greater emphasis on systems of meaning, such as ideologies and theologies, and the moral context of identities. This domain is also the most relevant to our sense of authenticity. Living in congruence with one's core value identities is associated with feelings of authenticity, while incongruence gives rise to feelings of inauthenticity and associated emotions (guilt and shame).

Another area of sociological inquiry that would benefit from greater attention to values is social movements. This suggestion builds on the previous one. It also builds on developments in social movements theory that have shifted focus from resource mobilization to collective identities (Melucci, 1995). Within the "new social movements" (e.g., feminism, environmentalism, gay rights), identity issues have moved to the foreground, mainly in the form of "collective identities." Melucci suggests that the construction of a collective identity is the most important task of a social movement and central to the development of a group's goals, strategies, and internal dynamics. I would add that value identities are embedded within collective identities as key components of the ideologies of social movements. A social movement is typically identified as representing and advocating one or a few specific values, such as "equal rights," "pro-choice," "pro-environment." Values are integral parts of a movement's ideology and become important elements of members' self-definitions (value identities), with implications for commitment to the social movement. They may even provide the moral foundation for members' self-conceptions. This is most evident in religious movements, and in religious conflicts (of which there are plenty these days), but are present to some degree in most social movements.

Values are powerful sources of motivation (sometimes, they are values to die for) and they are powerful bases of group identification and intergroup conflict. They should be given more prominence in our sociological theories and research. Robin M. Williams Jr. tried to show us the way.

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